

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #69 answer: HORSEFLY WEED (*Baptisia tinctoria*)

This native's many names tell us stories. *Baptisia* comes from the Greek *bapto* for dipping (as in baptism), and *tinctoria* comes from the Latin *tingo* for dyeing (as in tint and tincture). Indeed, the leaves make a cheap blue dye, so people named it wild indigo. The beaked seedpods and leaves turn a distinctive charcoal color, so it was also wild *black* indigo. Seeds rattle in the pudgy, woody pods when they dry out, so it became rattleweed. Riders tied bunches to bridles to whisk away flies and called it horsefly weed.

You can tell horsefly weed from other native *Baptisia* species by its small, gray-green, three-lobed leaves and its abundant racemes of short, bright yellow flowers. It has a rather compact range, in the mid-Atlantic states from South Carolina to southern New Hampshire and Vermont. It looks like a bushy shrub, although it dies back completely each fall. Woody roots persist, helping it survive drought and fire.

Unlike other members of the pea family, the Fabaceae, horsefly weed has poisonous glycosides and alkaloids. Grazing animals rightly shun it. Not so wise, early settlers thought it a sovereign remedy for typhus and flu.

On the other hand, horseflyweed treats pollinators well. Wild indigo duskywing butterfly larvae feed almost exclusively upon it, though they snack on invasive crown vetch. A lot of other butterfly larvae, including eastern tailed blues, sulphurs, and silver-spotted skippers, feed on the foliage, and it is a favorite of the frosted elfin (extinct in Virginia). The main pollinators are bumblebees, especially queens, who feast on the abundant nectar before retiring to lay eggs.

WILDFLOWER #70

Clues: Wands of white flowers droop over a marsh.



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